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THE CLAIMS OF INDUSTRIAL ART

An address by
LESLIE W. MILLER

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THE CLAIMS OF INDUSTRIAL ART

*Considered with Reference to Certain
Prevalent Tendencies in Education*

AN ADDRESS BY LESLIE W. MILLER
*Principal of the School of Industrial Art of the Pennsylv-
ania Museum*, BEFORE THE PHILOBIBLON
CLUB OF PHILADELPHIA, FEBRUARY 27, 1908



PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY THE SCHOOL
OF PRINTING, NORTH END UNION, BOSTON

1908

Composition and presswork by Apprentices in the School
of Printing, North End Union, Boston, June, 1908

THE CLAIMS OF INDUSTRIAL ART

Considered with Reference to Certain Prevalent Tendencies in Education :: :: :: BY LESLIE W. MILLER

IT is all so new, this conception of art as something compatible with industrial aims and methods, that explanation and insistence are still in order. It is not so many years since the very name of industrial art was a term of reproach, if not of contempt, to great numbers of fairly intelligent and perfectly well-meaning men ; while to many more the combination of words which constitute the expression conveyed no meaning, but seem rather a contradiction of terms, out of which no sense could be made. I am sorry to say that there are persons now alive on whose minds this impression still continues to be made ; and even where the case is not so bad as that, there are vast areas of intelligence in which the real meaning of the words is very far from being accepted, and the significance of the idea which they embody very far from being appreciated or understood.

To how many of us, even now, who are attracted by that magic word, art, does not the notion come at once that here is the most exclusive, and exceptional, of human things ; the thing, that is, which only the smallest possible "remnant" can reasonably be expected to know anything about, and in the actual practice of which only a minute fraction even of this remnant can hope to succeed.

I shall never forget a remark—very sensible from one point of view, but very discouraging from another—that was made to me during my student days by the dear old professor to whose wise counsel we owed more than to almost any other influence. "If,"

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he said, at the opening of the school one year, "at the end of half a dozen years we can point to half a dozen men who amount to something worth while, we shall think we have done very well." Now this was all right as far as the purpose of the school which he had at heart was concerned ; but, frankly, I could not help thinking more about the ninety-nine that were left out of his reckoning than of the one who was counted on to justify the existence of the school. And I hope this was not altogether owing to the fact that I was more or less conscious of belonging to the ninety-nine class myself. For, after all, this larger class has its rights and its reasons for existing quite as much as the more exceptional one, and it seemed to me a not unworthy aim to try to make any school whose direction might be entrusted to me do a good deal more for the ninety-nine who had no hope of reaching the solitary pinnacle, than to leave them more discouraged, and possibly more disqualified for the real work before them, than they were before they came under my influence. Besides, we must not forget that the bulk of the world's work has got to be done by these more moderately endowed ones, if it is ever done at all, and the function of the school is surely quite as much the development of efficiency in the many as the discovery of exceptional endowments in the few.

That was more than thirty years ago, but such experience as I have gained in the meantime has had the effect of confirming the conviction that was forced upon me then, and I am sure that whatever modest service I have been able to render as a teacher in the years that have elapsed since that time, has been in the direction of helping men and women all along

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the line, instead of being much concerned with the very few who probably get on with their particular work quite as much in spite of the schools as by their help.

Now, all this may be very true, and the question still remain, What has that got to do with art? You may say, as some people certainly think, that the industrial aim in education may be legitimate and helpful, but art is another matter altogether. Well, that brings us to the main point at once. What is art, anyway, and what is the secret of its magical charm, that makes everybody want to study it, whether they have the ghost of a chance of succeeding as painters or sculptors or not?

It is probably a conservative estimate to assume that at least 10,000 young men and women are at present seriously devoting the best years of their life to the study of art here in America, and that 5,000 more American students are enrolled in the art schools of Europe. The number of those who think, or whose fond parents think, that they have a genuine call of the spirit in this direction, and even of those who are supposed to be studying for the profession in minor schools, or by themselves, "from nature" and all that, is of course very much larger than the figures I have given, and I am sure my estimate is well over on the safe side. Now, everybody knows, and everybody says, that it is as plain as the sun at noonday that there is not the slightest chance that more than an insignificant fraction of these 15,000 pupils will ever do anything that can be taken very seriously as the practice of an artist's profession. One of the most pathetic figures of our time is the very familiar one of the well trained, and often

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very talented, artist for whom there seems to be nothing to do ; and if this is true of a considerable part of the best men we have, how pitiful does the picture become if it is made to include the vast majority who never make any mark at all !

The question that is always asked is, What becomes of them ? and the answer is that they find their place ultimately, if they find it at all, in the industrial arts, the field of which is large enough to include all forms of production into which the element of taste enters as an important consideration. This means that the field is practically unbounded and the opportunity for service which it offers is practically unlimited, and our pity for the failures, on the one hand, gives place to wonder, on the other, why we have not paid more and earlier attention to the adjustment that was sure to be demanded, and to directing more of this artistic energy into profitable and ever-open channels by ways less devious and less wasteful than those provided by disappointment and despair. In other words, why not frankly accept at the outset the truth that is sure to have to be faced sooner or later, and insist that industrial aims should be recognized and emphasized throughout at least all the earlier years of the course pursued by the average art student, to the end that whether he goes very far on the way to high attainment or not, he may be getting something that will be immediately available in the struggle before him — something, too, that is sure to be wanted, and that from the point of view of either individual interest or collective advancement, is well worth doing. Is it not pretty clear that present educational tendencies are all in this direction, and that the acceptance of the vocational aim and the reckoning

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with reasonable expectations in the matter of careers are among the most obvious signs of the times in all current discussions of educational affairs?

To present the claims of industrial art is simply to apply this principle to that large and immensely attractive phase of culture which we designate as art; and to examine these claims means to investigate the connection between the uplift and inspiration for which art stands, and the industrial efficiency which we so much desire.

Of all the tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum discussions in which stupid and unprofitable argument has been wasted since the world began, this one about what constitutes the *simon-pure* article in art, as distinguished from imitations, is surely among the least profitable. What does art mean to anybody but the ability to make something? Whether it is a sight or a sound, an object or an impression, does not matter so much, only something is made that serves as the means of expressing a definite, possibly a conscious, purpose, and exciting a definite, possibly a conscious, interest? Are there, after all, any more than these two faculties that man has any notion of—to know something and to be able to do something? This last is art; use the plural number and nobody makes any fuss about it, but use the singular number and begin the word with a capital, and you have trouble enough on your hands.

The trouble is mostly caused by unprofitable hair-splitting. The many forms and shades and degrees of creative effort in the world are part and parcel of nature's infinite variety, but the impulse that is the compelling cause of them all is practically one and the same; and if such human manifestations of

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it as we are interested in at present are worth cultivating, as we think they are, there are excellent reasons for believing that they are to be most profitably cultivated at that fountain head which we call art.

Art education, then, properly understood and applied, is the real solvent for the industrial education problem; only this understanding and this application must be something real and practical, as the vague generalization about the supreme importance of the art element in all higher civilization with which we are reasonably familiar, certainly is not.

We all know well enough, for example, that the apprentices in old Ghirlandajo's paint-shop were not only made of much the same clay, and were probably all pretty well taught in much the same way, although one of them was ultimately to execute the frescos in the Sistine Chapel, while the others were to find their places all down the line as painters of signs and symbols of all sorts and degrees of excellence, but all, let us hope, contributing something of interest to the age to which they belonged.

We know, too, that Leonardo was not only just as honorably employed, but that he was exercising exactly the same powers, when he was planning water works and fortifications as when he was painting *Mona Lisas* and *Last Suppers*; just as Fulton and Morse in later days expended, to quite as good purpose on steamboats and telegraphs, the same ingenuity that had already made both of them very good portrait painters. We know, too, that Albrecht Durer was on the same track—which was quite the right track—when he was working as a goldsmith, as when he was making the pictures that have earned him his evangelistic honors. Some of us even go so far as to

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harbor a suspicion that Quentin Matsys and all his kind were quite as truly artists, with all that the term implies, and were quite as well employed when they were doing their famous blacksmithing, as when they were painting their rather finicky pictures.

It is high time to drop these stupid and unfair distinctions between the art that is fine and that which is not, and to recognize frankly the truth that what we call the art impulse is simply the instinct that impels us to create something; that the forms which this instinct assumes must be as varied as our natures, and as changeable as the temper and the needs of humanity itself.

In a blind and groping kind of way, this has been perceived all along, and the multiplication of art schools and the conviction that has inspired the efforts (largely futile) that have been made during the last thirty-five years to make art instruction an essential part of general education, had its origin, and still finds its justification, in the perception of this truth. The mistakes that have been made in attempts to grasp and apply this principle were natural enough, and were perhaps an unavoidable part of the experience out of which sounder methods are ultimately to be evolved. It was natural, for example, to think that if art was the one thing needful, the only right thing to do was to teach art, as this is understood by the painter of pictures, and teach it abundantly; the theory of the more serious minded being that although for the vast majority of those bidden to the feast no places would be available at the table, yet even the crumbs that fell from so august a board would provide more nourishing fare for the disappointed ones than any second table that could be

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set for their benefit. Strange as it may sound today, I myself listened to this line of reasoning, presented in almost these very words, during my student days, and believed it too, as, apparently, great numbers of students still do.

In its practical working out, this theory has resulted in something like this: Art schools have multiplied indefinitely, their methods copied or supposed to be copied from the two or three schools in Europe whose names have become familiar to us through the vogue of the painters who had studied there; the dominating feature of all instruction being, of course, the life class. Indeed, one may almost say that art education for the vast majority of students has come to mean the life class, the whole life class, and nothing but the life class.

Everything of a more elementary nature is treated mainly as a preparation for this class, and admission to it is everywhere regarded as almost an end in itself. How far this mistake has been carried is well shown by the virtual monopoly of school honors — prizes, traveling scholarships, etc. — by work which represents nothing after all but patient copying of the nude human form, such considerations as originality in design, of intelligent grasp of a subject, of power of imagination or skill in composition, to say nothing of adaptation to any definite purpose, being almost wholly ignored. There have been in recent years many well meant and most generous efforts made to help deserving students by means of money prizes large enough to enable them to spend several years in European study. Nothing could be better than the spirit that has animated these gifts, but the results have been pitifully meagre—enough so to raise

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the question whether they do not do more harm than good. If they do, it is largely because they encourage the very tendencies that are most hopeless anyway, by focussing still more the efforts of students on the things that they will never do very well, to the neglect of those in which they might attain, if diligently served, the most triumphant success.

Now, industrial art aims to get a little closer than that to the situation which at least ninety-nine out of every hundred art students have got to face sooner or later. Moreover, it aims to cultivate in those who are to do the real work of the world an attitude toward that work that shall be something very different from that induced by a sense of disappointment at having failed at something else. To those who think about industry in the right way, art is a synonym for all that is uplifting and inspiring in the work of human hands, and they take care to surround the pupil who is attracted to a school by the magic of that wonderful little word with influences that force him to associate the essence of the qualities which this word expresses: not with pictures and statues especially, but with all sorts of objects that embody the idea of human service, imaginative and other, and whose production represents in any marked or striking way the result of human thought and care.

As a matter of fact, the art museums of the country are mainly dependent upon objects of industrial art for the interest of their collections now, and all that is needed is a franker recognition of industrial claims and franker acceptance of the industrial — even the commercial — aim. For even where we admit rather patronizingly the industrial purpose as not altogether degrading, we balk at “commercialism,” and are de-

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terminated that whatever else an artist does, he must starve or forego our approval. Now this is all just as wrong as it can be. The commercial spirit which we justly hold responsible for so many demoralizing tendencies is bad enough certainly and probably deserves on the whole all the hard things that are said about it; but it has not invaded art, nor is it likely to. There is too much incompatibility there for that. On the other hand, nothing would do so much for art of the right kind as a little genuine promotion on commercial lines. If people could be made to see, for example, how much more permanent was the interest that attaches to good native hand-wrought things that smack of the soil of particular neighborhoods, and reflect something of the character and some of the traditions that make the neighborhoods themselves worth knowing; if they could learn how much better that sort of thing is than the ready-made stuff ground out at wholesale by machinery in Oshkosh to sell as cheaply as possible in Tallahassee, that is copied from some tawdry original that once belonged to some palace of bankrupt nobility in Europe, but is expected to help furnish the home of a working man in America,—it would be well worth while. Incidentally, I think we should applaud and not disparage any efforts in that direction, and feel that the more commercially successful they are the better it is for art. Such efforts are being made today, and the fact that they are made is one of the most hopeful signs of the time. How many village and fireside industries that once added immensely to the mental as well as physical comfort of rural communities here in Eastern America, might be profitably revived if we could only get the right agencies at work. They

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will be revived, if at all, at the touch, not of a pitying philanthropy, or of commercialism in any of its crude or brutal forms, but of art.

What we need here in America, more perhaps than anything else, is a diffusion of that kind of culture that inculcates appreciation of whatever is centrally and inherently noble and beautiful, and develops the kind of self-respect that is possible only where people have this kind of appreciation. Mr. Emerson never said anything better than that each one of us, although he cannot do everybody else's work, can do something better than anybody else. Let him learn to do that thing and stick to it as if it were the best worth doing of all the things in the world. But let him make sure first that it is something worth doing, one of the safest tests of which is to find out whether it is anything for which anybody else cares. Art has come into the world in obedience to the social instinct, its very birth-cry was a call for approval and enjoyment in common, and that is why its greatest triumphs have always been achieved by work that could not exist without a public, and why the most dismal of its recent failures are due to the extent to which the principle of self-expression, so called, has been overworked. The kind of art that we need is that which identifies itself most readily with the activities and the sympathies that are alert today.

The museum and the school of art should preserve the most precious memories of the past, certainly; but they should also vitalize the activities of the present. It is good to know how things were done in times very different from our own, but it is better still to learn to do ever better and better the things that our own times demand. The fascination of archæol-

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ogy is undoubted, and the educational value of a reverent study of the archaic may be immense, but it is easy to overdo either one of these aims to the neglect of the cultivation of taste and power in forms that are immediately available for present day purposes. Let us, by all means, have the learning that enables us to possess in imagination the flocks of Admetus and the products of Penelope's loom, but let us keep at least one eye on the possibilities of wool raising and wool manufacture as these are understood and applied in this twentieth century of Christian civilization.

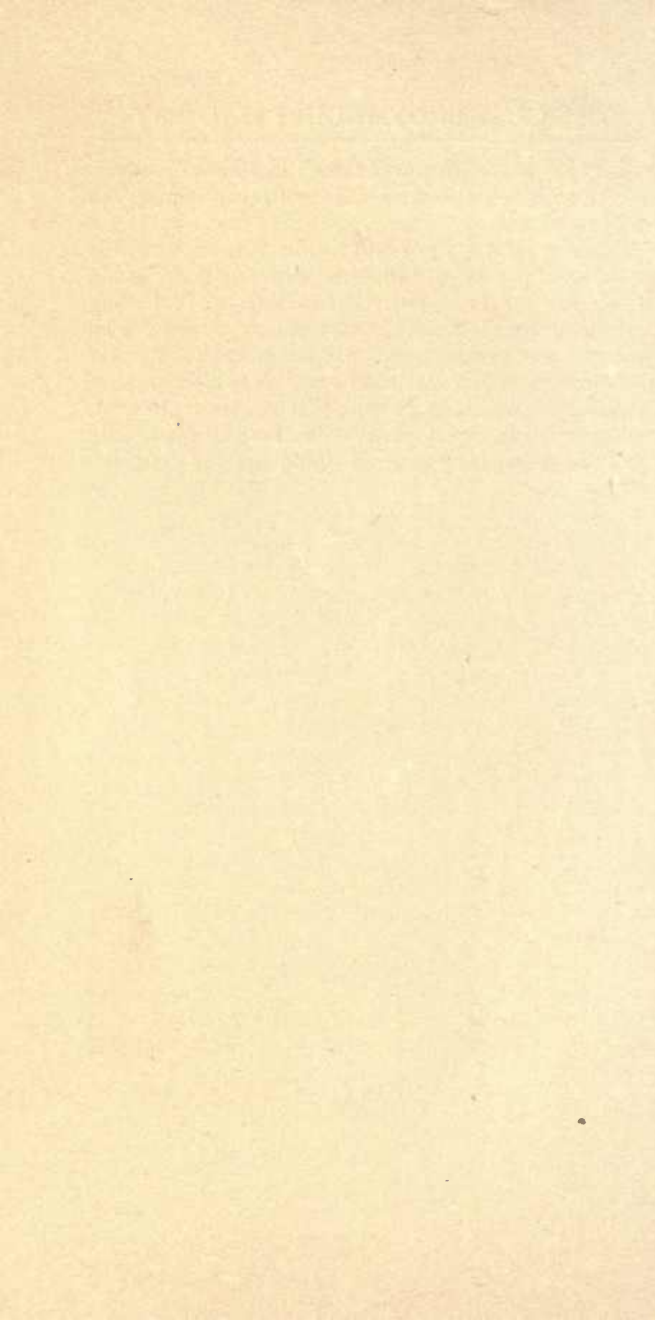
We are becoming conscious of our industrial shortcomings, and beginning to realize the value of the knack of doing things that is slipping away from us, and we are seeking to rehabilitate the trades by means of trade schools. We are on the right track in this, of course, but all trade instruction that is thorough must be highly specialized, and it is possible that the best work of a general nature that we shall find it possible to do, even on lines that are confessedly and distinctly industrial, will be in the direction of diffusing and promoting a knowledge and a love of art; only to be vital and helpful, this knowledge must be continually associated with forms of expression that connect it with the widest possible range of effort and the most varied forms of application.

To avoid waste of energy, as well as to ensure the highest efficiency, this association of aims and ideas should inform all educational effort from the most elementary to the most advanced. The few who explore the mountain peaks of attainment will be all the stronger for their labors in the lowlands, while every one of their toiling brethren will stand a good chance of finding ample opportunities for exercising the best

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powers he has in the wider and, incidentally, much more fertile fields that stretch all the way up on the broader slopes.

Frankly, then my gospel of industrial education is art education with an industrial turn; and my guide toward the art education that is best worth having is the aim to do something that somebody wants. The rare and exclusive things will never lack admirers and supporters, but constructive effort in either statesmanship or philanthropy will, if it is wisely directed, occupy itself in developing on the broadest possible lines the power on which all noble service depends.



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